DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 598 UD 024 121

AUTHOR	Jimenez, Marilyn
TITLE	Contrasting Portraits: Integrating Materials about the Afro-Hispanic Woman Into the Traditional Curriculum. Working Paper No. 120.
INSTITUTION	Wellesley Coll., Mass. Center for Research on Women.
SPONS AGENCY	Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE	83
NOTE	14p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Authors; Black History; Blacks; *Black Stereotypes; College Curriculum; *Females; Higher Education; Literary History; Racial Discrimination; Racial Relations; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Fairness; *Sex Stereotypes; *Slavery
IDENTIFIERS	*Afro Hispanics; Hispanic Languages; *Hispanic Literature; Patriarchal Societies

ABSTRACT

Images of Black women in Hispanic literature tend to be the work of White authors or Black male authors who, however well-intentioned, cannot articulate the direct, lived experience of the black, Hispanic woman. Moreover, the image of the Black woman in Spain and Latin America is the result of a slavocratic, patriarchal system and, therefore, plagued with racist and sexist assumptions. How language is used reveals much about how a society views racial heterogeneity. In Spanish literature even before the conquests, for example, efforts were made to mask the presence in Spain of Blacks, especially Black women: to take Blacks seriously was a threat to the social order. Black women appeared only as comic foils to White women, whose beauty and whiteness were thus enhanced. The presence of Black women in the social order thus affected the way in which White women were viewed. More studies on this dialectical relationship are needed, and courses on Hispanic women must explicitly refer to it. Of course, in a patriarchal culture, women of all races are subjugated. But the differences in the treatment of White and Black women in Spanish and Hispanic history (e.g. the "chaste White woman," the "sexually powerful Black woman") must be understood, and related to the existence of racism and slavery. Rosario Ferre's short story, "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" (When Women Love Men), specifically concerns the conflict of Black and White Women, and reveals the economic bases of both racist and sexist images. It is exactly the type of work that should be used in courses on Hispanic women. (KH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marilyn Jimenez

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The Afro-Hispanic woman has no literary voice that she can call her own. Images of black women in Hispanic literature tend to be the work of white--male and female--authors or black male authors.[1] However well-intentioned and empathetic these authors may be, they cannot provide the direct, lived experience of the black, Hispanic woman. Moreover, the discourse that envelops the image of the black woman in Spain and Latin America is the result of a slavocratic, patriarchal system and, therefore, plagued with racist and sexist assumptions. To integrate works about the Afro-Hispanic woman into the traditional curriculum then, we must first dig deeply into the roots of this discourse and bring to light its many ruses.

To begin with, we must understand that slavery and its aftermath had a profound and subtle effect upon the way in which language is used, especially the language of racial distinctions. Slavery is more than an event of history or an economic system; it is a system that generates its own words, symbols, and dichotomies. The way in which racial terminology evolves reveals much about the complex and often ambivalent way in which a society attempts to come to terms with racial heterogeneity. The word 'moreno', for example, which, as Isabelo Zenon Cruz has pointed out, meant a person of African descent in fifteenth century Spain, was used in Puerto Rico (and we may add in other parts of Latin America) to mean a racially white person of slightly dark complexion.[2] Isabelo Zenon Cruz traces the change in usage in Puerto Rico to the nineteenth century, a period when the Puerto Rican elite was trying to forge a separate identity for itself. Rather than incorporate the black heritage of Puerto Rico, the

'white' elite chose to ignore the presence of blacks in their midst, choosing instead a quasi-mythical Indian heritage. At the same time, they appropriated the word 'moreno' as a means of establishing a new dichotomy. The shift in the usage of 'moreno' suggests then not an attempt to mediate the black/white dichotomy, but an attempt to establish a pragmatic dichotomy--moreno/negro--to preserve the racial distinctions threatened by increased miscegenation. Thus, in a context where the racial purity of the dominant class might be questioned, the moreno/black dichotomy would become operative; in a context where there was less fear of the taint of racial impurity, the word 'moreno' could safely be used to mean a Negro.

This example serves to illustrate how the presence of blacks and a black heritage can be subtly masked in language. Similarly, the presence of Blacks in Spain before the conquest is often overlooked. Slavery based upon racial distinctions and not merely the result of war was known in Spain as early as the XIth century, and by the XVth century 48% of the slave trade was with Europe.[4] The presence of blacks could hardly have been ignored and must have had some effect upon the way in which the image of both men and women was elaborated in Spanish culture. Yet, if one reads general histories of Spain and even some specialized works, one could derive an image of Spain as a country where there were no blacks to speak of. Even in works dealing with Spain's Golden Age, when the presence of blacks could hardly be denied, there is a tendency to elide this aspect of Spanish culture. In truth, there were black slaves, black scholars, and black rebels in Spain during the XVIth and XVIIth centuries.[5] From indirect evidence, it can also be deduced that there

were a substantial number of black female slaves who mainly served as household servants. The saucy black maid, for example, was a fixture in the theater of such dramatists as Lope de Rueda. Then as now, blacks were only visible/permissible in comic roles. To take blacks seriously was a threat to the social order. The black maid served as a foil to the white mistress whose whiteness and beauty were thus enhanced. The presence of black women in the social order thus affected the way in which white women were viewed, and the image of both black and white women depended to a large extent on the position assigned to each within the slave system.

This dialectical relationship is seldom recognized in works dealing with the role of women in Hispanic cultures. That the black, female servant lived in the shadow of her white mistress is obvious; that the role and image of the white mistress somehow depended upon that of her black servant is not as obvious. It is customary to write about the role of the woman in Hispanic society as if the word 'woman' referred to white women only. It is usually only in the specific context of race that the limited and limiting nature of the commonplace usage becomes evident. White women are talked about as if only their relationship to society mattered; theirs is an autonomous discourse. When non-white women are referred to, it is usually in their explicit relationship to white women; they do not constitute a separate reality; theirs is a dependent discourse. In point of fact, the image of the white woman evolved in counterpoint to the image of the non-white woman. The 'mora encantada,' the black slave, the Amerindian woman, and the mulata served at different times and in different places to define the values that the white woman was to represent. Indeed, the demographics of race and the nature of

the economic system had an effect upon the images of women in relation to each other. Thus, as Teófilo de Queiroz Júnior points out, the presence of a large number of black female slaves and the negative, exploitative image of the black woman that evolved from slavery made it possible for writers to idealize the Amerindian woman in very much the same terms that they idealized the white woman.[6] At the very beginning of the conquest, however, the Amerindian woman had fulfilled the role of the lascivious Eve in contrast to the chaste, white woman. Thus, the introduction of slavery into Brazil altered the relationship between white, Amerindian, and black women. On the other hand, where black slavery had less of an impact, for example in Argentina, the negative image of the Amerindian woman persisted.

More contrastive studies of this type are needed for all areas of Latin America, for the role of women cannot be accurately defined in isolation from the historical context of race and class. Thus, in teaching a course on Hispanic women we must make an explicit reference to the relationship between white women and women of color in Hispanic cultures. We cannot in this short paper pursue all the variations upon this theme. Suffice it to say that in a slavocratic, patriarchal society the contrasting portraits of the white and black woman serve to subjugate both. In a slave society, the contrast between Mary and Eve, between chaste mother and sensual mistress, is accentuated. As the white woman is "spiritualized" by being distanced from work (at best, she plays at domestic chores, since most of the actual work is done by slaves), from motherhood (black female slaves breast-fed her children), and from sexuality (the myth of the lascivious black woman or 'mulata quente' desexualizes the white woman), the black woman is 'carnalized' by being forced

to embody the opposite values. This dialectic is cogently described by Bell Hooks in Ain't I a Woman:

> The shift away from the image of white woman as sinful and sexual to that of white woman as virtuous lady occurred at the same time as mass sexual exploitation of enslaved women--just as the rigid sexual morality of Victorian England created a society in which the extolling of a woman as mother and helpmeet occurred at the same time as the formation of a mass underworld of prostitution.[7]

Similarly, in nineteenth century Brazil, "the chastity of the vast majority of women of the seigneurial class," in the words of Heleieth Saffioti, "was made possible by the prostitution of others."[8] The case of the Brazilian woman of the colonial period is especially interesting, for even more so than her Hispanic counterpart she became a prisoner of her own image. The invisible bonds of social conscience bound her to the manor, so that she never left the house except to go to church. Within the home, she was for the most part idle, though a few women made up for their imprisonment with exaggerated activity. Married at an early age and sexually inexperienced, she was merely the procreator of the legitimate children. Imprisoned within the home, she was on occasion led to practices that suggest, in the view of Roger Bastide, a tendency toward lesbianism.[9]

The relationship of white and black women in the domestic sphere is an area that scholars have yet to explore. Clearly, during the period of slavery, the home was the battleground where white and black fought for dominance over the restricted power allotted to the woman by patriarchal society. To the extent that a woman's "power" was sexual, the woman of color won out. In Hispanic and Lusitanian cultures, there is a pervasive, ingrained belief

about the extraordinary powers of attraction of the black woman. In Lope de Rueda's Servir a señor discreto, for example, the black slave asks that her beauty be praised too, for her color is supposed to fascinate white men: "Pues yo tengo por muy bueno mi color, porque el moreno dicen que a los hombres mata."[10] In Brazil, the myth of the 'mulata quente' is still very strong, as evidenced by the popularity of Jorge Amado's novels and Shika, a film about a black female slave who overcomes all the white men around her with her secret, sexual powers. In the realm of values, however, it is the white woman who is victorious, or rather, those values attached to the white woman. Virginity and chastity were values that only white women could possess, and these in turn obviously had an economic value in a patriarchal system. Women of color aspired to imitate the restrained behavior of the white woman, hoping to be granted the same status. Their efforts were largely in vain, for the society had already assigned them a role that was to become their fate. Verena Martinez-Alier in her work on marriage and concubinage in nineteenth-century Cuba has shown that marriage laws restricted the ability of even the free-born woman of color to marry outside of her caste.[11] The demographics of slave society also worked against her. There were, in nineteenth-century Cuba, more free black females than free black males; therefore, the surplus black female population either had to remain unmarried or become the concubines of white men. Moreover, the prevailing social attitudes made concubinage to a white male preferable to legal marriage to a black male. The desire to whiten through her children is not (as Franz Fanon would have it) a pathological state of the woman of color, but a very rational--

if self-destructive--response to the socio-economic system.

In American society, according to Bell Hooks, "the devaluation of black womanhood" during the period of slavery "shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended."[12] Similarly, in Latin America the attitudes concerning black women today are the persistent and pervasive legacy of slavery. Moreover, in the United States, the conflict between white and black women has been diffused to a certain extent by the ability of both groups to enter the work force, whereas in the dependent economies of Latin America black and white women are still locked in combat within the narrow, domestic sphere.[13] Hispanic and Portuguese cultures are still strongly marked by the slavocratic patriarchy of earlier centuries, and the enmity of white and black women is the subject of many literary works. One work that deserves special attention because it makes use of at the same time that it surpasses this conflict is Rosario Ferré's brilliant short story, "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombros" (When Women Love Men).[14]

The story centers on the relationship between Isabel la Negra, a character based upon the life of a real woman who ran a famous house of prostitution in Puerto Rico, and Isabel Luberza, a white woman of society. The action is triggered by the death of Ambrosio, the husband of Isabel Luberza and a lover of Isabel la Negra. In his will, Ambrosio divides the family estate between the two women, forcing them to share the ancestral home. Many years pass, however, before Isabel la Negra, impelled by a desire to move her establishment into a fashionable neighborhood, decides to claim her share of the house. In the intervening years, Isabel Luberza has come to resemble Isabel la Negra more and more, to the point where it is difficult to tell who is telling the story, the wife or the mistress.

In describing the two women, Rosario Ferré deliberately draws upon the traditional racist and sexist images of black and white women. Isabel, the wife, is ethereal and delicate; her skin is transparently pale. She is the spiritualized, desexualized image of woman. Isabel la Negra, on the other hand, is a woman of massive proportions, with skin the color of coffee grounds. Her seemingly inexhaustible sexuality has served to confirm the masculinity of a generation of white Puerto Rican males. However, within Isabel, the wife, Isabel la Negra has grown like a tumor. The transformation of one into the other begins when Isabel, the wife, as a young bride, paints her nails an uncharacteristic bright red. Since blacks are supposed to like bright, intense colors, the red nail polish becomes a sign of the merging of the two. The story ends with Isabel la Negra's body being buried as if she were Isabel the wife.

The two Isabels represent the dichotomous image of woman created by a patriarchal society and further accentuated by a racist system. In the story, however, these two aspects of women have been drawing together since their separation "at the beginning of time":

> en nuestra pasion por ti, Ambrosio, desde el comienzo de los siglos, nos habiamos estado acercando, nos habiamos estado santificando la una a la otra sin darnos cuenta, purificandonos de todo aquello que nos definía....[15]

Their love for the same man brought them together in conflict; with the death of Ambrosio, the two women are free to express their natural tendency to be one and the same. In the absence of the male "discourse," the voices of the women fuse into one.

Rosario Ferré's story frees the women from their respective images by

bringing them into conflict over their patrimony, thus revealing the economic bases of both racist and sexist images. In the same way, we as teachers can strive to demythify the discourse that holds white and black women prisoners by constantly viewing these images and roles dialectically in their mutual dependence upon a racist, patriarchal discourse. Such an approach is needed if we are to counteract the pervasive myths that exploit us. In Latin America especially, there are still individuals who can assert in a major international journal that "the mulata is sexually attractive in her own right, quite independently of social conventions or lack of them." Thus, they ignore the works of sociologists who have shown that the supposed attractiveness of the mulata is a myth based upon her vulnerable situation in the socio-economic system.[16] There are also respected writers who can naively romanticize the institutionalized violence against black women by stating that "the first night a black woman and white man spent together marked a turning-point for our country, and a day aglow with light dawned for the culture of the Caribbean."[17] That the culture of the Caribbean is a fusion of black and Hispanic cultures cannot be denied, but we must not mask the act of violence that gave birth to that culture. There are also those who deify the Black Mother because of her strength and fortitude but who never asks against what she needed strength.[18] These images must be rigorously analyzed and demythified, lest in teaching about Hispanic women we continue to forge the chains that bind us.

In teaching courses on women in Hispanic culture, I stress the importance of looking at the role of women in terms of other women in the society, that

is, of women of a different class or of a different color. This dialectical approach leads us to ask what more and what else lies behind the official discourse on women. It is important, for example, to trace for the student the contrast between the Moorish woman and the Christian woman in Medieval Spain, and how this contrast evolves, with different racial groups playing the role of sensual Eve. Aspects of what we have termed the domestic sphere, which includes every activity and institution related to the home, family and sexuality, and of women's relationships within the domestic sphere should also be a part of the class presentation. Students should be made aware, moreover, how socio-economic systems, especially slavery, affect the domestic sphere. Finally, works that bring to light the socio-economic context of the contrasting portraits of women, such as the story by Rosario Ferré, and works by black women authors should be made part of the traditional curriculum.

Footnotes

[1]Of the handful of Afro-Hispanic authors listed in Richard L. Jackson's bibliography, only two, Nancy Morejon and Virginia Brindis de Salas, are women. See Richard L. Jackson, The Afro-Spanish American Author (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1980).

[2]Isabelo Zenon Cruz, Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura Puertorriqueña (Puerto Rico: Editorial Furidi, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 31.

[3]The usage of the word moreno varies widely from country to country and often depends upon the context. The important thing to note here is the shift in usage and when it occurs.

[4]Phillip D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) cited by Annette Ivory in "Juan Latino: The Struggle of Blacks, Jews and Moors in Golden Age Spain," Hispania, 62, No. 4, p. 618, fn. 2.

[5]See the Annette Ivory article cited above for an account of the life of a black slave who achieved the highest academic honors of his day yet was condemned to remain a slave.

[6]Teofilo de Quieroz Junio, Preconceito de Cor e a Mulata na Literatura Brasileira (Sao Paulo, Atica, 1975), p. 30-31.

[7]Bell Hooks, Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1982), p. 32.

[8]Heleieth I. B. Saffioti, Women in Class Society, trans. Michael Vale (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 124.

[9]Roger Bastide, "Psicanalise do Cafune," Sociologia do Folclore Brasileiro. Sao Paulo, Ed. Anhambi, 1959, p. 315-316, cited by Teofilo Queiroz Junior, p. 28.

[10]Cited by Teófilo Queiroz Júnior, p. 28. Translation: "For I consider my color to be good because, as they say, brown skin kills men."

[11]Verena Martinez-Alier, Marriage, Class and Color in Nineteenth Century Cuba (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

[12]Hooks, p. 52.

[13]On Brazil as a "Patrimonial patriarchy" and the status of women in dependent economies, see Saffioti inter alia.

[14]In Papeles de Pandora (Mexico: Joaquin Mortiz, 1976), pp. 26-44.

[15]Translation: "In our passion for you, Ambrose, from the beginning of time, we have been coming closer, we have been santifying each other without realizing it, purifying ourselves of everything that divided us..."

[16]J.O. de Meira Penna, "Racial Problems: The Brazilian Persona," Diogenes, 112, Winter 1980, p. 17.

[16]Miguel Barnet, "The Culture that Sugar Created," translated by Naomi Lindstrom in Latin American Literary Review, Vol. VIII, Spring-Summer 1980, No. 16, p. 38.

[18]See Ann Venture Young, "Black Women in Hispanic American Poetry: Glorification, Deification and Humanization," in the Afro-Hispanic Review, Vol. I, No. 1 (January, 1982), for a summary of the attitudes and images of black women in poetry.